

ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN

Official Publication of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English

Vol. 33, No. 8

Urbana, Illinois

May, 1946

Published every month except June, July, August, and September. Subscription price, \$1.00 per year; single copies, 15 cents, or two for 25 cents. *Entered as second-class matter October 29, 1941, at the post office at Urbana, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879.* Communications may be addressed to C. W. Roberts, 204a Lincoln Hall, Urbana, Illinois.

The Marking and Grading of English Compositions

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One of the important jobs inherent in the teaching of composition is that of marking and grading students' papers. Grammar, of course, cannot be taught in isolation; and formal instruction in grammar must be supplemented with a great deal of actual writing experience. The pupil gains this experience from the themes which he must write from time to time. After the student has prepared and submitted his paper, the teacher becomes a literary critic and proof-reader, as it were; and the task of evaluation begins. This evaluation is a very complicated procedure, demanding a great deal of thought and good judgment if it is to benefit both teacher and pupil. The young inexperienced teacher, in fact, often finds this part of his job difficult and bewildering; and even the teacher who has had years of professional experience may be unfair or inefficient in his marking; therefore the entire problem of marking and grading compositions is worth examining very carefully.

During the last ten years, the grading system, as it appears in most American schools, has been under attack. Many educators are dissatisfied with the practice of giving letter grades, i.e., "A", "B", etc. There is, however, nothing new in this criticism of marking. The attack is merely the renewal of an old war. In the preceding period, there was a similar condemnation of the percentage system and a trend toward the use of letters. In order that the stress might be on the comparison of the child with the rest of the class, the use of the probability curve also became very popular for a time. Now the trend is, at least to some extent, toward the S. and U. system in which only two grades, "satis-

factory" and "unsatisfactory," are given. The idea which is the basis of the S. and U. method is one which John Dewey has deeply planted in our educational philosophy: the entire child — his personality, his mental health, and his physical well-being — is the important thing. The emphasis, in other words, is on the child; and the subject matter becomes secondary. Even though the S. and U. system may be rejected, future methods of marking and grading will be affected by Dewey's basic idea, for this is the trend which all education is rapidly taking.¹

There are, indeed, weaknesses to be found in the grading and marking of many teachers. Some of the most common ones are as follows: 1. Students are given a false standard of progress which often inhibits progress. 2. An artificial motivation is set up outside the course area. 3. The grading may be so arbitrary that the students study the teacher as much as they do the course. 4. The system may encourage competition that glorifies not achievement but being ahead of everyone else. 5. The grades tend to be accepted at face value with emphasis on possession; thus sharp practices develop. 6. The grading is not done objectively. 7. There is little consistency in grading, and there may even be variations from day to day. 8. Additional emphasis is placed on fragmentation of learning elements; and recognition is given to piecework performance, not necessarily connected with real growth. 9. Students often do not understand the basis upon which the grading is done. 10. Few teachers encourage students to grade their own work. 11. Sometimes congeniality or prejudice may enter into the grade.²

Most educators readily admit that these faults often do exist; nevertheless they are hesitant to abandon the entire grading system, for they know that any substitute may easily prove to be no better than the present method. It seems best, therefore, to improve the systems that are now in use. By skillful, thoughtful planning, the teacher can use letter grades in a way that keeps the spirit of Dewey's philosophy. Even the very act of grading may be an educative process, and this is particularly true of marking English compositions. Each one of the eleven weaknesses that have been listed may be corrected if the English teacher earnestly attacks the grading problem.

An accurate standard of progress demands, of course, that

¹ Cain, W. A., "Trends in Marking and Grading," *The Texas Outlook*, XIII, (March 1936), 179-187.

² Tender, I. H., "Is There a Substitute for Teachers' Grades?" *The American School Board Journal*, CI, (July 1940), 25-26.

the other ten faults be remedied; however there are some additional factors that must be taken into consideration. The teacher should estimate each child individually and set up a maximum effort goal for him. Although the brilliant student makes little progress, he may receive good grades because the teacher is using the average child's work as the comparative basis for grading. No grade is accurate unless it also takes into consideration the student's potentialities. It is unfair to give an "A" to a student who could do better but whose "half-best" easily surpasses the work of his classmates.³ The poor student also will benefit if he understands his limitations and is made to realize that he is to overcome them, not compete with the brilliant student.

The teacher can easily make use of a plan that encourages effort. He may give an effort grade in addition to the regular grade so that the student may see how his work compares with his abilities. The teacher explores the mentalities and backgrounds of each pupil. Then a goal is set up for each pupil — a goal which cannot be reached if the pupil does not work. This goal may be unofficial, and a certain letter or percentage may still stand as the passing mark. The pupil should realize, however, that failure to achieve this standard of effort is failure in the eyes of the principal and the teacher. The marks evaluated according to the effort goal may be recorded in red ink in the teacher's gradebook; thus comparison is quick and easy. The student should see these grades frequently, and the teacher should discuss them with him in conferences.⁴

If the grades on his themes are to mean anything to the student, there must be some way of comparing written work done in the English classroom with that done in other places. This comparison can be made if the teacher will examine the papers which the pupil writes in other classes. He should also discuss the papers with the teachers of those classes. The student who is receiving an "A" in English may be writing "D" papers in his history class as far as the quality of composition is concerned.⁵ The school administration may not allow the teacher to lower a student's grade on the basis of work written in other classes, but the teacher can use the comparison of work to make

³ Combellick, W. F., "How Hard Do Pupils Try?" *The Nation's Schools*, XXVIII, (December 1941), 29-30.

⁴ Fontaine, A. C., "Superior Mentalities in Our Schools," *High Points*, XXIII, (September 1941), 64-68.

⁵ Mirrielees, L. B., *Teaching Composition and Literature* (New York, 1944), p. 144.

the student realize that a high grade in composition is unimportant if he does not maintain this same level outside the English classroom. When the student learns exactly what his grade means, that grade will become a fairer standard of progress.

If the picture at the end of the term is to be a true one, the marks at the beginning must be fair and representative. One should not give grades that are higher or lower than evaluation shows them to be. Many teachers do this in order to produce a favorable psychological effect upon the students. It merely results in a false standard of progress.⁶ There is, however, one exception to this rule. It is best that the new teacher give no grade higher than ninety during the first months of teaching, as the usual tendency of the young teacher is to grade too leniently. The pupil is often confused when his grades fall lower and lower though he is trying much harder. The answer to this situation usually is that the young teacher has discovered that he has been grading too easily, and he is now "cracking down."⁷

Superior teachers do not need to use grades to spur students on to work. The teacher who cannot arouse interest in any other way is the one who must resort to grades to motivate his pupils. "The menu that the teacher presents is not fitted to the child's appetite; therefore grades are used to make him eat."⁸ The student suffers from the teacher's inabilities and studies only to keep from failing. If classes are interesting and alive, grades will lose any importance they may have as a motivating agent; marks will no longer be either a whip or a reward.

Tests have proven that grades are an arbitrary matter and that they definitely vary from teacher to teacher. One teacher may give a paper an "A" while another may give the same paper an "E." Nowhere is this more likely to happen than in the grading of compositions. There is a great deal of disagreement as to what comprises literary merit, for one's likes and dislikes are largely a matter of taste. It is, therefore, impossible for all teachers to grade compositions alike. It has been shown, however, that variations are the widest when the graders of themes use their own favorite methods. Variations, on the other hand, are greatly reduced when the graders use an analytic method which

⁶ Warren, W., "Give Pupils a Break," *The Journal of Education* CXIX, (June 1936), 315-317.

⁷ Mirrielees, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁸ Denman, G. E., "Who Has Failed — Child or Teacher?" *The American School Board Journal*, XCVII, (December 1938), p. 43.

considers the mechanical, literary, and logical aspects separately and allots marks for these elements separately.⁹

There are teachers who boast that they are "tough graders" and who seem to enjoy setting up unobtainable objectives for their pupils. There are, on the other hand, teachers who are "easy graders" and give the students the benefit of every doubt when the time comes to hand out grades. Teachers of both types are guilty of malpractice, and their effect upon the student is extremely bad.¹⁰ The students soon discover the "easy" teachers and seek them out. They avoid the more exacting teachers if it is at all possible. The "collective standard" has been designed to help remedy this situation. It calls for one reading by the entire English staff of one paper per student, per semester. A three-page anonymous theme is prepared in class by each student for this special exam. It is written without previous planning upon a topic chosen from a list new to the student. This paper supplements the final examination, and the mark that the student receives will comprise a substantial part of his final grade. The student no longer seeks out the "easy grader"; but he follows the instructor who can help him over this hurdle, which he must face at the end of the term.¹¹ The final result, moreover, is a fairer one because the papers are graded by a number of teachers; the result is a cumulative evaluation.

No method will, of course, completely erase the problem of the arbitrary element in grading. "English will always be difficult to grade, as it is based on years of experience and has no regular content to be quantitatively evaluated."¹² Each teacher, however, can examine his own practices and strive to free himself from prejudice. The students should be encouraged to look at their own ideas and not the ideas of the teacher. The superior teacher stimulates a great deal of free original thinking and demands only that this thinking be based on logical reasoning. When the teacher exacts fair and careful marking from himself and rewards original ideas, the students soon discover that there is no need to study the instructor; therefore they turn to the more profitable study of composition itself.

⁹ Cast, B. M. D., "Efficiency of Different Methods in Marking English Compositions," *The British Journal of Educational Psychology*, IX, (November 1939), 257-269; X, (February 1940), 49-60.

¹⁰ Wallin, J. E. W., "Scholastic Pottage," *Progressive Education*, XIII, (June 1936), p. 316.

¹¹ Rhode, Robert, "Collective Standard in Freshman Composition," *The Texas Outlook*, XXVII, (February 1943), p. 49.

¹² *Ibid.*

Grades have often been considered anti-social phenomena, which foster ill-feeling among the students and set up barriers between pupils and teachers. The mark may become the goal of all education, and a premium is often placed on competition for grades and not for learning. George Combe, a Scottish philosopher, once said, "The gratification comes not in the attainment of an object valuable in itself, i.e., the grade, but in a feeling of personal superiority over a neighbor. It is not the actual possession of knowledge that puts the child at the head of his class but the fact that others in the class are more stupid or less diligent."¹³ Some students may go so far in giving social significance to a grade that they call the "C" a "gentleman's grade."

The attitude of the teacher helps counteract the tendency of pupils to overestimate the value of grades. The student should be made to realize that grades are only "an indication of the teacher's idea of how well the student has mastered what he has taught, and of how the student ranks with other members of the class."¹⁴ Through the setting up of individual effort goals, the teacher should encourage the student to compete with himself. The teacher must emphasize "creative effort, earnest endeavor, and achievement for the sake of doing one's best work."¹⁵ This does not mean, however, that a student should not be proud of a good grade if he has got it fairly through hard work. Just as the man who is successful in his job gains a raise in pay, the student who does outstanding work deserves some reward.¹⁶

Parents place great emphasis on grades, and the children mimic this parental attitude. To deflate the importance of the grade, the teacher must begin in the home. He may take the parents into his confidence and explain carefully what his grades mean. To supplement formal grade cards, some Texas schools have made use of letters to the parents. The teacher and the pupil have a conference to discuss what the student's grade should be. When they have decided upon a grade, the pupil writes a letter to his parents and tells why he received this particular grade. This method has several advantages over the old system of sending out reports. The pupil gets an analysis of his successes and failures, and the teacher has an opportunity to guide the

¹³ Eggertsen, C., "Nineteenth Century Criticism of Twentieth Century Marks," *School and Society*, XLIII, (June 13, 1936), p. 818.

¹⁴ Rust, L. O., "Speaking Again of Grades," *The National Parent Teachers Magazine*, XXXIII, (August 1938), p. 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Bicknell, G. L., "The S. and U. Grading System," *The Texas Outlook*, XXV, (July 1941), p. 18.

child as they discuss his grade. The most important thing, however, is the fact that this method brings the teacher, the student, and the parent closer together. Grade-giving becomes a cooperative procedure; and achievement, the basis for every mark. "Teachers, therefore, cannot tell someone else (the parent) about their failures and get this someone else to do the punishing because they can't figure out a better way of doing things."¹⁷

Cheating and sharp practices will decrease as the student sees that the teacher emphasizes actual learning and progress. If fear of parental disapproval and punishment is removed, the student may not be inclined to gain good grades by dishonest means when he fails to obtain them by honest efforts. The parent, realizing the capacities and limitations of his child, encourages and helps him instead of using grades as a whip; therefore the student knows that even his failures will be understood.

The problem of grading papers objectively is perhaps the greatest difficulty that the teacher of composition must overcome. "Skillful writing has not been broken down into its component elements adequately, and rhetoric controls are too subtle for satisfactory measurement."¹⁸ One cannot measure interest and importance of ideas as one can mechanics of composition and accuracy of information. To be objective, in other words, one would have to confine marking to "the efficiency with which one expresses oneself"; yet this allows little credit for imagination, humor, wit, etc., i.e., that capacity which intelligent people consider an inseparable part of composition ability.

The Steel and Talman method of marking compositions is an attempt to make the grading more objective. The marking is confined to expression, and subject matter is ignored. Three features of expression are considered: A. vocabulary, choice of words and idioms, B. sentence structure, C. sentence linkings. Columns headed "A," "B," and "C" are ruled in the margin of the composition. If a word is incorrect or baffling, a minus sign is placed in the "A" column; but if the student has used an excellent word, a plus sign is placed in that column. Similar penalties and rewards are marked in the "B" column, etc. Spelling and punctuation may be recorded in a fourth column; but these marks do not count in the final score. The teacher then adds the plus and minus signs. The grades range from high plus to low minus, summed up algebraically. The system is fast, and

¹⁷ Rayne, E. W., "And Now to Make Out Grades," *Education Methods*, XXI, (May 1942), 387-390.

¹⁸ Rhode, Robert, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

the teacher can grade many papers in a very short time. The S. and T. method, however, ignores the aesthetic qualities of composition; and for this reason, it is not likely to gain favor over the old analytic-impressionistic method.¹⁹

Since most teachers believe that neither expression nor content can be overlooked in the marking of themes, the "two-grade" method is becoming very popular. "On every theme two grades are given $\left(\frac{C}{C}, \frac{B}{B}, \frac{A}{81}, \frac{D}{85} \right)$ and as a rule two comments. One grade, that on the top line, is the teacher's estimate of the value of the theme's content. The grade below the line is the teacher's estimate of the form or mechanics of the theme."²⁰ The teacher also writes a comment on each of these two grades. The one on content deals with selection of ideas, originality, etc. The second comment, on the other hand, is concerned with the technical aspects of the paper, e.g., punctuation and spelling.²⁰

When grading the content of a theme, it is best to look at the ideas of the paper as if they were written correctly even though this may not be the case. The teacher should, in other words, "divorce those errors, those rambling 'and' sentences and the bad grammar, from the thing that the pupil has attempted to do."²¹ The mechanics of composition are considered when the form is evaluated by the teacher. The student should realize, however, that the teacher cannot base his final grade on content alone. Even though the content of a student's papers may be consistently good, the student must fail if he does not correct poor form. There is a reward for good content, but there is also a penalty for poor form. Neither grade in this "two-grade" system can be considered alone.²²

The teacher may use a 75 per cent theory for content and a 90 per cent theory for form. In evaluating content, as the teacher begins to read a theme, he considers it a 75 per cent paper until its merits prove it to be worth more, or its errors prove it to be worth less than 75 per cent. The grading of form is different. The teacher gives the grade of 90 to any paper which contains none of the mechanical errors that have been selected as the minimum essentials for that group. A certain percentage is de-

¹⁹ Morrison, R. L., and Vernon, P. E., "A New Method of Marking English Compositions," *The British Journal of Educational Psychology*, XI, (June 1941), 109-119.

²⁰ Mirrielees, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

ducted from 90 per cent for each error. There is also a bonus of ten points that may be given for outstanding merit in expression.²³

The teacher will discover that very few students have the ability to write literary masterpieces. The content of most themes written by students will probably be untouched by those qualities that characterize the work of a professional writer. The pupil who cannot make his compositions brilliant as far as content is concerned, however, can make them excellent in mechanics; and he should concentrate on this. "If all minimum-essential faults are avoided, and the pupil has made an honest workmanlike use of the teaching you have given (variety of sentence beginnings, varied sentences, etc.) that pupil has done well. Whether his paper does or does not show charm is a matter of relatively little importance."²⁴

It is true that not even this "two-letter" system of grading can be purely objective, but it does make the evaluation less dependent upon the subjective opinions of the teacher. By considering form and content separately, the teacher has more definite elements to look for than he does when attempting to consider the entire theme at once. Form can be graded objectively; and since this method makes it possible to consider form apart from content, one aspect of the grade, at least, is evaluated objectively. The pupil does not receive a grade that is completely compiled on the basis of content, and the variations in marking are greatly reduced.

Inconsistencies, which often occur from day to day, may be partially eliminated by the teacher. He should set up a definite system of grading and a set of objectives upon which to base the grading. If the teacher has some pattern to follow, there is less chance of changing methods each time that a paper is to be corrected. The teacher must know where he is going and have a definite route to get there, a route which the students also know and understand.

Another practice which will reduce variations in grading and produce a fairer standard of evaluation is that of marking all the papers of one class before one begins to mark those of another class. Since the objectives of each class are different, one should not grade sophomore papers on the basis of senior objectives; and this may happen if one grades a paper from one class and then one from another.²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Fragmentary and piecework performance is not as possible in composition as in other subjects. It is necessary to bring in many elements of grammar in order to write a single theme. It is true, of course, that a student may avoid difficult constructions; and the teacher should take this into consideration when marking papers.²⁶ The student must be encouraged to use varied constructions. In order to insure the use of a particular construction, the teacher may ask that it be included in the assigned theme. If the students write a great number of compositions, the teacher will have a more complete performance to evaluate at the end of the year than she will if the papers are few. There should be many grades in the teacher's record book when it is time to send out the final reports. These grades will then indicate the over-all picture of the student's work.²⁷

Many teachers still believe that heavy penalties are necessary when students hand in late papers. The usual practice is that of lowering the grade on that particular paper, and this is done regardless of the conditions that surround each individual pupil from day to day. Do teachers get zeros if they fail to attend a teacher's meeting or don't prepare for the next day? A fixed rule of lowering a grade a certain number of points because the paper was late is harsh, and such rules turn the teacher into a cold calculating machine in the eyes of his students. One must, however, do something to discourage late work; otherwise the pupils will make no effort to have their papers completed on time. The best practice seems to be that of recording the grade which the student would have received if the paper had been submitted promptly, and then encircling this grade. The student who has had four successful days, however, should not become a failure because of one bad day when his work was not completed. The teacher should get an over-all picture of the pupil's work; and although he records and encircles these grades, the teacher should consider them only as a part of a larger complete record, for in order to avoid grading on piecework performance, he must not take any *single* grade too seriously.²⁸

Students like goals, but the teacher must make these goals concrete and clear. The objectives and minimum essentials upon which the teacher's grading is based must be understood by each

²⁶ Mirrieles, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

²⁷ Poynter, J. W., "Blind Man's Bluff," *The School Executive*, LIX, (September 1939), 13-14.

²⁸ Deisenroth, J. J., "Academic 'O' Hour," *Clearing House*, XVI, (November 1941), 143-145.

member of the class. The class may, in fact, decide with the teacher what these objectives should be and designate the penalties for failure to reach any of these objectives. Each student should have a list of these objectives in his notebook so that he can refer to it from time to time. The teacher, moreover, must do his grading on the basis of these objectives; and he must make no new ruling without notifying each student.²⁹ The teacher must be able to justify any mark that he may give. If the teacher has marked the paper according to a definite system of grading of which the student was previously informed, he will reduce many misunderstandings; moreover he will be able to give proof for any mark that the student might question.

The teacher can easily make use of a plan that will teach students to grade their own work. The scheme which follows is simple; yet it has been proven worth-while and efficient. Each student reads his own theme and grades it. Then the students exchange papers, and each student grades the paper of a classmate. After the student has his own paper returned to him, he writes a brief criticism of his work. In this criticism, he justifies the grade that he gave the paper and also tells whether or not he thinks his classmate marked the paper fairly. These written comments are given to the teacher along with the original composition.³⁰ This plan does take time, and the teacher will have to judge how often he can make use of it; however, any time that is spent in teaching self-evaluation is worth-while.

It is very difficult for the teacher to keep his personal feelings completely apart from his grading. Prejudices often do enter into marking even when the teacher makes every effort to be fair; but the teacher, nevertheless, should keep trying to be as unbiased as possible. He must take his job seriously and realize that any unfairness on his part may affect the entire life of a student. It would be well for every teacher to examine himself very carefully so that he can begin to correct any prejudices that are influencing his marking. There is no one solution to this problem; it must be left to the discretion of the individual teacher to choose what remedy seems best for him.³¹

If the teacher is to remedy all these weaknesses, he must have a few time-saving devices to make the task of grading easier.

²⁹ Smith, M. C., "Does Correcting Errors Discourage Creativeness?" *The Elementary English Review*, XX, (January 1943), 7-12.

³⁰ Alilunas, L. J., "Experiment in Self-Evaluation," *The Nation's Schools*, XXX, (July 1942), p. 25.

³¹ Ryan, H. H., "Do Boys Get Short Changed?" *Clearing House*, XVIII, (May 1944), 557-558.

One such device is a simple code for marking. Pupils must have a definite knowledge of any code the teacher uses and references to consult when they have any doubt concerning the code. The class may formulate the code with the teacher; thus they will understand it much better, and the teacher will not have to use a great deal of time in explanations. Some of the symbols frequently used are:³²

C — capital needed	() — omit
NC — no capital needed	R — repetition
2 — two sentences in one	# — well chosen word
½ — incomplete sentence	# # — excellent sentence
W — wrong word	** — no errors
S — spelling	* — see me
Λ — word omitted	

The teacher merely puts a check over the errors in the composition and returns the paper to the student. The student makes no changes in his original work but simply puts a code mark over each check to show what error he made. He then double-checks with another student whose paper he examines in return. The student then submits his paper to the teacher for a second examination. The teacher, of course, marks the wrong corrections, which he has made. The students, in addition to placing code marks over the checks, may correct all the misspelled words in the margin.³³

The teacher should never forget that he must accompany his grading with help and encouragement. He must not deceive the pupil; but if he is too severe or sarcastic, he may merely defeat his own purpose. The child, in other words, will become so discouraged that he will quit trying altogether. Ben Jonson once gave some very wise advice to teachers. He said, "No more would I tell a green writer all his faults lest I should make him grieve and faint, and at last despair, for nothing doth hurt more than to make him so afraid of all things that he can endeavor nothing."³⁴ Grading compositions, therefore, should include not only the marking of errors but also the recognizing of merits. When a student uses a word well or writes an excellent sentence, the teacher should praise these merits even though he must also condemn a number of serious comma faults in the same paper.

³² Steinruck, D. H., "Children Love a Code," *The Instructor*, LII, (March 1943), p. 17.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ App, A. F., "Old Ben Jonson on Grading Compositions," *College English*, IV, (February 1943), p. 319.

Any recognition that the teacher gives to good work will encourage the pupil to correct his errors in order that all his writing may be of the same high quality.

The teacher must never overlook the importance of grading; yet he must not allow the technique of marking to overshadow the reasons for marking. These reasons are: 1. to measure accomplishment so that the student may know the rate of his progress, 2. to evaluate this accomplishment in order to see how it stands up to the minimum standards of the institution.³⁵ The teacher should never cease his efforts to improve his grading, for he owes this to his students and his profession. Since grades often follow a pupil out into adult life and affect his chances of getting jobs, entering colleges, etc., the teacher owes him a fair evaluation of his abilities. The teacher who forgets this important responsibility has failed in his profession.

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³⁵ Vaughan, D. P., "Systems of Grading," *The Fortieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, p. 603.

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Trends in Spelling Instruction

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Gone are the days of formal, strictly disciplined spelling drills. Gone, too, are the tediously long lists of uncommon words and the boringly complicated dictionary exercises — or so we hope. For research, experiments, and observations of recent years have led progressive educators to refute many of the timeworn methods of spelling instruction and substitute more efficient ones.

The inadequacies of many of these long-practiced methods have become evident in the inability of many young people to spell correctly. In some schools, instructors still persist in using these older, inefficient teaching methods, but more and more teachers have come to realize the value inherent in many of the newly developed trends in spelling instruction.

Of course, many of these theories and practices are still in a state of evolution, but many others have been proved successful and are constantly being "aired" before the reading public. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to a brief survey of those major tendencies in spelling instruction as set forth in recent educational publications.

Many poor spellers have long hidden behind the excuse that they possessed an innate disability to spell and for that reason could never become proficient spellers. This excuse is no longer valid because it has been proved that any normal or even dull normal individual can be taught to spell if introduced to an adequate learning technique.¹ A mistaken attitude toward spelling or inadequate teaching in the primary grades rather than an innate disability are often responsible for poor spellers.

Much attention has been given to the question of innate spelling disability but too little has been given to the much worthier problem of spelling readiness. Many children are introduced to a formal spelling program before they really feel a need for spelling. Success in spelling is based upon the maturity and experience of the students; a desire to learn to spell is not enough.² The methods and materials of instruction must be kept at a level of understanding for the children. It has been found that a thorough background of phonic analysis, reading, and handwriting distinctly aids in spelling achievement.³ Training in some of these important language abilities and emphasis on visual and auditory perception help in the development of correct spelling habits. While many tests are good for a diagnosis of factors likely to interfere with learning, informal rather than formal spelling tests are preferred for the prediction of spelling ability.⁴

¹ Wilson, H., "Good Spellers, Born or Made?" *Parents' Magazine* (November 1943), 106.

² McIntire, A., and Hampton, H. L., "Spelling Readiness: A Challenge," *Elementary English Review* (January 1944), 24.

³ Russell, D. H., "Diagnostic Study of Spelling Readiness," *Journal of Educational Research* (December 1943), 278.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 280.

The question of whether spelling should or should not be taught with a great deal of emphasis on phonetic analysis has long been a controversial one. At the present time, however, most authorities feel that a phonetic basis for spelling is not only advisable but necessary. Many even feel that most trouble with spelling can be traced back to a lack of phonics instruction.⁵ Since the great majority of English words are spelled phonetically, the argument that phonetics hinders the student in spelling nonphonetic words is not valid. The few irregular forms must be memorized.

Experiments in which a thorough program of phonetics was taught and extra training was given in hearing and writing initial sounds show that this training is very helpful in increasing spelling efficiency.⁶ Drills in syllabication and meanings of prefixes and suffixes are also effective. Adequate knowledge of phonetics increases the students' ability to help themselves in spelling new words and makes them more independent in all forms of written work.⁷

The ability to read well is just as closely related to spelling efficiency as phonics. In fact, studies of the interdependency of the learning areas of language have led Emmett A. Betts to state that, "Since language is developed in an orderly pattern, a substantial level of reading achievement appears to be a prerequisite to systematic instruction in spelling. In fact, experience with reading vocabulary is an important criterion for the grade placement of spelling vocabulary in a basal textbook."⁸ Most often poor readers are poor spellers, and many educators feel that spelling is so closely related to every content subject that it should be taught as encountered rather than as a separate subject.⁹

The tendency today is to stress the meaning of the word and its use in context as well as to present drills on the spelling of individual words. The correlation between reading comprehension and ability to spell is so great that Thorndike and many other teachers foster a teaching method which improves the students' ability to perceive words during reading in a way that is bene-

⁵ Peavy, K., "Phonics in Spelling," *Instructor* (February 1945), 14.

⁶ Wallace, A., "Phonics in the Spelling Class," *National Elementary Principal* (October 1941), 48.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁸ Betts, E. A., "Interrelationship of Reading and Spelling," *Elementary English Review* (May 1945), 17.

⁹ Peavy, *op. cit.*, 15.

ficial to later spelling.¹⁰ Wide and varied reading activities result in a great deal of secondary learning of spelling, and slow pupils are benefited by free reading. Many spelling deficiencies are overcome by an improvement in reading comprehension.¹¹

The realization of the close interdependence between reading and spelling abilities and between all the language areas has struck the death blow to the long-practiced method of isolated word drill. In spite of the fact that isolated word drill is no longer favored, scientifically worked out spelling practice of appropriate words is still recommended.

Spelling has long been regarded, by teachers and students alike, as a distasteful necessity that must be tolerated. Fortunately, the outlook upon the subject is now changing somewhat. The factor of motivation in spelling is now receiving a great deal of consideration. Students must feel a real need for the words they are asked to spell, and those words should be determined by their use for them in reading and writing. Teachers should plan varied activities and experiences for student participation in order to create occasions for spelling needs and writing activities.¹² Many ingenious games, riddles, quizzes, and other exercises can be used to brighten up the spelling program.¹³ The spell-down has been replaced by games that have just as many of its good points and none of its bad ones. Self-competition is preferred to competition between students of unmatched abilities.¹⁴ Centers of interest must be created to act as reservoirs from which new spelling words can be drawn; and thus, motivation becomes a helpful factor in spelling mastery.

Experience and research have contributed a great deal to settling the problem of what and how many words should be taught. The tendency is to cut down considerably the number of words formerly studied. A small body of basic words should be taught to all the pupils, and then this list should be augmented by words satisfying the individual needs of the student. Authorities feel that a consistent and thorough check on fewer useful words

¹⁰ Geyer, E. M., "How Many Spelling Demons Are There?" *English Journal* (October 1944), 434.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 436.

¹² Guilfoile, E., "Planning the Spelling Program," *Elementary English Review* (January 1943), 14.

¹³ Mangold, M., "Giving Purpose to the Spelling Lesson," *School (Elementary Edition)* (December 1943), 326.

¹⁴ McIntire, A., "Spelling Can Be Fun," *Elementary English Review* (November 1945), 27.

is more beneficial than learning many rare new ones.¹⁵ The factor of diminishing returns must also be considered. If students are forced to learn to spell too many words, accuracy is greatly affected.¹⁶ These word lists should be based on the findings of surveys that have been made and should be classified in difficulty and usefulness according to the grade placement and most important needs of the students.¹⁷ Surveys of adult uses and needs of words were taken and compared with those of the children. Both the lists had many words in common, and the adult spelling needs of the students should be taken into consideration when the basic lists are made up.¹⁸

The supplementary lists should be based upon the particular activities and interests of the pupils. Other sources are classmates' names, words the teacher is asked to spell, words misspelled in compositions and answers to questions, and words needed to spell for different occasions such as Christmas or Thanksgiving.¹⁹ Words beyond the child's understanding should not be included.

As the emphasis upon individual word drill has lessened, functional spelling has gained more attention. Educators feel that learning to spell words in context is good because it builds up word meanings more effectively and encourages understanding of the relationship of the various words in a sentence.²⁰ H. A. Halbert feels that judging spelling efficiency from the way it is applied in written work is an excellent practice because "The child's ability must be judged from what he actually does, not from what he may know."²¹

However, although authorities feel that studying words in context is beneficial to some extent and all approve of it to a certain degree, they still praise the efficiency of a regular amount of formal practice in spelling. They base their beliefs upon many tests that have been made with reference to the effectiveness of

¹⁵ Lee, D. M. P., "Spelling Load Is Too Heavy," *National Elementary Principal* (July 1941), 484.

¹⁶ Horn, E., "Research in Spelling," *Elementary English Review* (January 1944), 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹ Wilson, M. B., "Choosing Words to Spell," *Instructor* (November 1945), 26.

²⁰ Straub, J. H., "Organismic Approach to Spelling," *Elementary English Review* (December 1942), 57.

²¹ Halbert, H. A., "Functional Spelling," *School* (Elementary Edition) (May 1943), 791.

studying words in lists as compared with studying them in context. It is a known fact that much incidental learning in spelling is gained from other sources such as themes, letters, and reading material; but many particular words need specific instruction.²² Tests given to many students show that studying words in column form was more efficient and took less time than studying in context.²³ Despite the fact that formal tests proved more efficient, the values of functional spelling are recognized when, after doing research on the subject, men like R. E. Guiles say, "We have shown only that a special spelling period devoted to the study of a basic list of words has only a limited influence on spelling accuracy."²⁴

There is much difference in opinion among the advocates of formal spelling instruction as to which is more effective, the test-study or the study-test method. A. N. Foster experimented using both methods, and even though the study-test method was more effective in a few cases, he concluded that there were no significant differences in the two. He felt that the problem needed further investigation.²⁵ By and large, most of the teachers seem to favor the test-study method. They feel that a pre-test directs attention to words that are not learned incidentally, and instruction can be concentrated on them. Ernest Horn says, "Tests not only direct learning and measure its efficiency, but they are also learning exercises in themselves. They focalize, motivate, and individualize learning."²⁶

The consideration and attention now given to individual differences is one of the results of an effective testing program. Under the old methods of spelling instruction, individual attention was slighted, but the special concern given to individual differences now is one of the outstanding trends in the teaching of spelling. Some of the factors involved in individual differences are intelligence, interest, attention, emotional control, good or poor ears and eyes, and favorable or unfavorable home influences.²⁷ Some students are in dire need of remedial treatment.

²² Horn, E., *op. cit.*, 11.

²³ Gilbert, L. C., and Gilbert, D. W., "Improvement of Spelling Through Reading," *Journal of Educational Research* (February 1944), 460.

²⁴ Guiles, R. E., "Effect of Formal Spelling on Spelling Accuracy," *Journal of Educational Research* (December 1943), 285.

²⁵ Foster, A. N., "Study Test Method of Teaching Spelling," *Texas Outlook* (April 1945), 37.

²⁶ Horn, E., *op. cit.*, 12.

²⁷ Hildreth, G. H., "Spelling in the Modern School Program," *National Elementary Principal* (July 1941), 481.

while others can progress only according to their own learning rate and should not be pushed beyond their own capacity.²⁸ Individual needs can be met through a well-developed activity program, and differentiated goals should be set up according to the varied capacities of the pupils. This individual plan of teaching is effective because it enables the children to concentrate on their own spelling problems and keeps them from spending time on words they already know.²⁹ The teacher and student are also able more easily to measure the progress made.

The value of teaching spelling rules has long been a bone of contention among authorities on spelling instruction. At the present time, however, both extremes have been abandoned, and most educators have come to an agreement that is expressed very well by Agnes Lauber when she says, "The teacher may not ignore rules but she must examine each one, test its value, and use it as far as it is helpful and not confusing."³⁰ The maturity of the students must also be taken into consideration.

Not only are new methods in spelling instruction being used to help improve young people's spelling ability, but a great deal of attention is being given to detecting underlying disorders that can be cured by individual retraining. Physical, neurological, and psychological examinations are given in some special cases in order to discover the basic disorder.³¹ It has been discovered that sensory impressions have a great deal to do with our ability to spell, and spelling exercises are given so that the perceptual images involve the use of eyes, ears, muscles, tongue, and hands.³² Some people use only one of these methods, but teachers should try to teach their students to use all of them to some degree.³³ Lee has worked out a plan for studying a word which involves the use of all these sensory organs. He suggests that the student should "read a word in meaningful context, see it, say it, write it, see it with the eyes shut, write it, see if it is right, and write it again."³⁴

The special attention that is given to the development of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 478.

²⁹ O'Reilly, E. P., "Providing for Individual Differences in the Teaching of Spelling," *National Elementary Principal* (July 1941), 504.

³⁰ Lauber, A. D., "Removing Spelling Difficulties," *Grade Teacher* (November 1943), 34.

³¹ McIntire, J. L., "Remedial Reading and Spelling," *Educational Administration and Supervision* (January 1945), 28.

³² Dawson, M. A., "Pupils Can Learn to Spell," *Instructor* (February 1944), 10.

³³ Dolch, E. W., "Problems of Poor Spellers," *Secondary Education* (November to February 1944), 18.

³⁴ Lee, D. M. P., *op. cit.*, 487.

spelling abilities through written composition is also indicative of the present-day stress on functional spelling. As another evidence of incidental learning, tests show that words used by children in expressing their own thoughts tend to be spelled with greater accuracy than words they do not voluntarily use.³⁵ For this reason, the need for short assignments in free writing should be recognized. Careful preparation and the use of aids such as the dictionary should be recommended. The value of proof-reading and revision should also be explained.³⁶

These trends in spelling instruction are indicative of the teaching tendencies in all other fields of education. They are just a small part in the slow evolution of a system of instruction, the aim of which is to aid in the complete development of American youth.

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³⁵ Millar, J. M., "Improvement of Spelling as a Tool in Written Expression," *National Elementary Principal* (July 1941), 498.

³⁶ Dolch, E. W., "Good Spelling Habits," *Secondary Education*, (November to February 1945), 8.

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